

IVOR GURNEY.

Information about Ivor Gurney's early years has only been collected in a rather scrappy way by me from what I have heard members of his family say, or from the few remarks he himself sometimes let drop, but I think that his childhood was not a happy one, and therefore, he very seldom seemed to like to refer to it, at least that was the impression I gained.

His father, David Gurney, was the seventh son of a man who was a builder. All the other sons, I believe, went into building as their trade, but David became a tailor, and at the time when I first saw the family, David Gurney had a shop at 19, Barton Street, Gloucester, and seemed to be one of the leading tailors in the place, although he can never have been well-off because poverty seemed so continually to be on the threshold. I don't quite know what social position the Gurney family occupied or whether they would be reckoned as having been of Yeoman or Peasant stock. Emily Hunt (of whom more later) once said to me that David Gurney came of good Gloucestershire Peasant Stock, but I somehow fancy that Ivor felt more like a Yeoman in his extraordinarily close attachment to the land, but it seems even more possible to me that the Gurneys may have been descendants of some quite good Norman family in early times,--a family who had come down in the world, for Ivor had certain characteristics which often made me think that he had a great deal of a Norman Baron in his make-up. He had a tremendous pride, a swiftness to anger,



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a lavishness of generosity - when he had anything to be generous with - that did not seem to me to be of Peasant origin, and his very bearing at times had in it something of a Norman pride and a sort of eagle-like power. In this, he did not at all resemble his father who, on the very rare occasions when I saw him, seemed to me to be gentle and slightly puzzled by life in general and his eldest son in particular. He was, however, I believe, a very kind nice man, and I know that Ivor was very deeply attached to him. His father I think at least came the nearest to understanding him of anyone in the family.

On the mother's side it is very difficult to say precisely what the family was that she sprang from. Her maiden name was Florence Lugg. She was so unusual in her whole way of thinking as to seem almost a 'borderline' case at times. She worried inveterately when I knew her, seemed to bear a continual grudge against life. Basically, her character was as hard as flint with an easy surface sentimentality, and so far as I could gauge her, she not only did not love anyone, but was probably quite incapable of feeling anything like real love. It may seem strange to dilate so much on her character, but it had a very real effect upon poor Ivor's life. For many years he seemed to cherish the ideal of what a mother's love might be and at times he ~~had~~ hoped for it from her, but he never got it, and ultimately his one wish was to have her kept away from him. Yet I think it was from her he inherited his strange power of placing ideas in unusually juxtapositions, a power which showed very much in his later poetry. But there was this

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difference, that with him it was genius and with her it was almost foolishness. There seems to have been a little musical ability in the family because Ivor's uncle Joseph was organist of a church in Gloucester I have been told, and I believe that there was some sort of connection, probably by marriage, with either Lane Wilson or Hilda Wilson. Also, Ivor's two sisters, Winifred and Dorothy, had a slight degree of musicality. On the other hand, his brother Ronald, not only without music, but appeared to have a violent prejudice against the Arts, and a supreme contempt for Ivor's writings.

Ivor's genius, therefore, sprang from practically nothing as far as one can tell. His was no case of music being handed down as it was in the Bach and Beethoven families.

When, or where, Ivor's parents met and married, I do not know, but Ivor was their eldest child and he was born on 28th August 189 at a house in Queen Street, Gloucester. When his parents took him to be baptized, they did so to a church at which the Rev. Alfred Cheeseman was the Vicar. When they had the child at the Font the Vicar asked who were the Godparents. The Gurneys had never thought of providing any, so Mr. Cheeseman offered to become Ivor's Godfather then and there. This was to have, in later years, a very great influence in Ivor's life. He was baptized Ivor Bertie. He absolutely hated the name Bertie himself. I remember very well

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when he came to join the Royal College of Music Union years afterwards I, as Hon. Secretary, took down his name and address, and I asked him what the 'B' stood for. "Bertie" he said disgustedly "My mother gave it to me". I found out long years afterwards, that she had done so out of social ambition, because at that time the Bertie family were very leading people in Gloucestershire, and Ivor Guest was particularly well-known. Mrs. Gurney therefore gave her eldest son a name as near the Hon. Ivor Guest as she could, which in itself, is an indication of her extraordinary desire for social advancement.

Of Ivor's very early years, I know very little, although I do remember his telling me once that he and his brother had little gardens given them in the back garden of their house, and he, Ivor, planted seeds and when they began to sprout he pulled them up to see how the roots were growing! - which, of course, tragically ended the garden as far as his patch was concerned. One or two of the poems in his book "Wars Embers" are directly biographical I believe, such as the one as "Down Commercial Road, Gloucester".

Ivor early showed that he had an exceptionally beautiful voice, and this led I suppose, through his Godfather, to his entry into the Choir School of Gloucester Cathedral. He became a very famous solo boy. His mother proudly said to me years afterwards "You know Miss Scott, it was not just that Ivor had such a beautiful voice, but he sang with such musical feeling and

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expression that people used to come from far and near to hear him". Whether all this was good for Ivor in the long run is an open question, for I remember very well that in the Summer of 1918 when I went to Gloucester and had a long talk with his father (Ivor being then in what was practically a Military Mental Hospital) David said to me "I wish to Heaven the boy had never gone to the Cathedral Choir School, but his mother would have it - she was full of ambition". Certainly the discipline in the Choir School must have been slack, for Dr. Brewer, afterwards Sir Herbert Brewer, cannot have been the right man for those under him, however well he did for himself. Ivor, I know, felt that Brewer had been altogether too slack with him, because I remember he once said to me that Brewer was not the right person for him to have been under: that Brewer, for example, would tell him to go to his house for a lesson at 11 o'clock, and when Ivor got there, Brewer would say he was not ready for him and then would say "Oh by the way would you just go up in the town and get some birdseed for me", and by the time Ivor got back with it, the time for the lesson would be gone and Ivor would be left with only a tiny scrap of lesson. This entire lack of discipline was very bad for a boy of Ivor's nature, and it is not improbable that when he came to go into the Army he suffered more intensely from the discipline there than he would have done had he been schooled into more orderly habits.

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On the other hand, the amount of musical experience which he got whilst in the Choir School, coupled with the excellent education, were certainly valuable. I believe that when singing solos, the passion and beauty of his singing were quite remarkable, and his musicianship was already so highly developed, that when he, in company with the rest of the Choir, took part in one of the 3-Choir Festivals, he was pitched upon to fill the place of third singer in the Trio "Lift Thine Eyes" in Mendelssohn's "Elijah", when the professional lady singer who had been going to do it, was suddenly taken ill. If I recollect rightly, he had to do it, he said, without any rehearsal, which must have been a rather tremendous experience in those surroundings and with such a huge audience. He did it with complete success.

Another recollection of his concerning 3-Choir Festivals, was of being taken over to either Hereford or Worcester, where the boys of the Choir were lodged in a room on the upper floor of the Hotel in which John Coates, the famous tenor, was staying. It so happened that the boys' room was immediately above John Coates, and Coates was so annoyed by the noise they made ragging and tumbling about the room, that he sent up to the Master to complain, so got them a caning. Years afterwards, I remember, one evening I was sitting in front of our drawing-room fire in Westbourne Terrace with Ivor, and he told me he had just sent a song to John Coates and that he had written a letter with it

saying that he hoped he would do the song as he (John Coates) owed him something for getting that caning years ago! I exclaimed in some dismay "You never did say that did you?". He replied with the utmost gusto and cheerfulness "Yes, I did", and then proceeded to tell me the story which I have just related.

The charming sequel is that John Coates took the latter in extremely good part, as he had a strong sense of humour, and he not only took up and sang that song of Ivor's, but he remained interested in Ivor's work to the end of his life. I remember very well the day when, after Ivor's death, the two volumes of songs which the Oxford Press had just published, were given a private hearing for an invited audience at the O.N.P. Room at Ahmen House in Warwick Square; John Coates was there, and he said to me "Come and sit beside me" and spoke very delightfully of Ivor.

During the time Ivor was in Choir School, I think his Godfather must have begun to lend him books. Ivor became an omnivorous reader, and in particular, his Godfather introduced him to the joys of poetry. Many years afterwards, Canon Cheeseman sent me the copy of "The Shropshire Lad" which he had lent Ivor. It was due to Canon Cheeseman also, that Ivor was introduced to the Miss Hurts because the Canon thought that Ivor needed some feminine influence to civilise him and teach him manners. They were half-sisters, Emmie being considerably older than Madge, but both were good musicians who for a number of years had taught at a good

Girls' School in South Africa. I rather think it may have been Grahamstown, but I do not now recollect. One was a pianist the other, a violinist. They had now returned and were living at 54, Wellington Street, Gloucester. They had quantities of classical music and a piano, and Ivor thus became acquainted with Chamber Music and German Lieder, which he would never have experienced in his musical life at the Cathedral, nor indeed at the Choral and Orchestral performances of the 3-Choirs.

He became very devoted to the Miss Hunts and they certainly taught him manners to very good purpose, for he knew perfectly how to behave in a drawing room - if he wished to behave well. In the holidays Canon Cheeseman used also to take Ivor to various places in the country, as he thought it was good for his education, but I, unfortunately, do not recollect now which were the various spots visited, except that I think one of them was Durham.

Ivor became very much engrossed with music, but the Cathedral life began to bore him intensely, and he longed for the time when his voice would break, so that he could get free from the choir. Finally, he and another boy decided to take matters into their own hands, for Emmie Hunt has told me that Ivor and this other boy retired to some spot where they would be undisturbed in the open, and then shouted and sang, ~~and~~ sang and shouted, till they had no voices left.

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He became an articled pupil of Dr. Brewer's and was so efficient as organist that he would often play the service at the Cathedral on week-days. It must, I think, have been at this time that he first met Herbert Howells who was also an articled pupil of Brewer's, and simply brimming with musical genius. Once in talking of those days, Herbert Howells told me, as an example of Ivor's temper and generosity, that Ivor was very much annoyed by some things that a fellow pupil said and then and there in the organ loft, Ivor knocked him down and broke his spectacles, at which Ivor picked him up and full of contrition and sympathy insisted on paying for the new spectacles, poor though he was.

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